

Workshop: Clear Talk about Wild Fire

Fire Continuum Conference, Missoula, Montana, May 21, 2018

Workshop Organizers: Nadia White and Andrew J. Larson

Workshop goal: Participants will leave this workshop primed to meet the communications challenges typical of their role during the 2018 North American wildfire season. This workshop is focused on building skills and experience to prepare participants to interact with journalists, especially through responding to interview questions.

Description: The ability to communicate essential information about wildfire during or related to significant fire events is a skill that should be honed when you are not on the hotseat. This workshop offers fire managers, fire research scientists and graduate students in related fields a chance to consider the different audiences they need to be able to reach. It will consider different communication scenarios, tools, and techniques that can help experts make their point, clearly, accurately and in a timely manner.

This workshop focuses communication of wildfire information through interviews with journalists. While the ultimate audience for wildfire messages includes many stakeholders, for example, impacted local residents and businesses, local business leaders and policy makers, contacts and interviews with journalists are often the proximate mechanism for communicating information about wildfires. We will look at the different approaches a communicator might consider as they interact with interviewers. Participants will hear tips from the pros and practice developing a message, being interviewed, staying on message in interviews and using humor, when appropriate, to defuse difficult situations. Core practical activities include crafting a wildfire information message and delivering this message in an interview, including peer and expert review. Expert speakers will include experienced journalists, community PIOs, frequently quoted fire scientists and others whose experiences will inform the practicum.

Workshop panelists

Michael Kodas, Deputy Director, Center for Environmental Journalism, University of Colorado Boulder

Nathan Rott, Reporter, National Desk, National Public Radio

Sarah Coefield, Air Quality Specialist, Missoula City-County Health Department

Tim Love, District Ranger, US Forest Service (retired)

Phil Higuera, Associate Professor of Fire Ecology, University of Montana

Schedule

Time	Activity	Learning goals and outcomes
0800	Introduction: White & Larson <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Introduce panelists- Introduce overarching workshop objectives	Review 2017 western MT fire season
0805-0830	Subject Matter Experts Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Describe their communication responsibilities- Briefly describe your 2017 fire season- Describe your biggest communications challenges- Describe successful & unsuccessful communications outcomes given their role and responsibilities	Review communication goals, primary audience, and responsibilities of “authorities” – fire information providers
0830-0840	Journalist Perspective <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Local- Regional- National	Introduce the goals, needs, constraints of journalists
0840-0905	Facilitated Expert Interviews and Critique	Model the types of questions a real journalist will pose, and approaches to responding from experts

0905-0915	Crafting a Message	Introduce the message box approach
0915-0945	Small group activity: Message Box and peer and expert review	Practice organizing a message using the message box, give and receive peer review
0945-1000	Break	
1000-1015	Interviewee's Bill of Rights <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is your story about? - When is your deadline? - Can you send me some info or draft questions by email before we speak by phone? - Can I call you right back? 	Introduce guiding principles for responding to a journalists' queries—what to do when a reporter calls
1015-1115	Small group session: Mock interviews with peer and expert review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Will draw on scripted questions so participants can interview each other 	Practice responding to realistic questions, staying on message; give and receive peer review
1115-1200	Synthesis of key fire messages and lessons from mock interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A look to the future—fire fatigue - Emergent themes and messages to communicate? - Reflect on most useful part of the workshop 	Provide a framework and key messages to promote clear, effective fire communication

Workshop 2: Clear talk about wild fire: Meeting the communications challenges of the wide wildfire audience

1. Setting the stage

Scorched Earth. High County News Special Report. Dec. 2017 ([PDF.](#))

Missoula's 2017 [fire season recap](#). The Missoula Independent. Nov. 9, 2017

2. Introductions

Sarah Coefield is an air quality specialist with the Missoula City-County Health Department. The 2017 smoke season in Western Montana challenged her to sustain compassionate communications with communities living with severely compromised air. She managed media calls, news releases and personal pleas every day for weeks. An essay she wrote for the Washington Post demonstrated just one form of her outreach that season: [My job is to manage air quality. This fire season, I'm just trying to help people breathe.](#)

Tim Love

A Public Information Officer T2 (PIO2) & Technical Specialist (THPS,) Tim Love served with Greg Poncin's Type 1 Incident Management Team (IMT) on the Lolo Peak Fire as a Public Information Officer serving as Community Lead. He led the community branch of the information function and supervised a staff of seven information officers at three satellite offices, the trap-line (delivering fire information to outlying areas affected by the fire), and communities.

As a Technical Specialist, Love coaches new Line Officers who have little fire experience and are working to advance their own fire qualifications so they can serve as an Agency Representative or Agency Administrator responsible for delegating fire management to IMT's and their oversight. As a District Ranger, he attained Advanced Fire Line Officer qualifications through a combination of training and extensive experience working with Type 1 & 2 Incidents of varied complexity.

Love was profiled in 2017 in Outdoor Life for a story headlined, [A Public Land Manager on How Americans and Their Federal Government Can Work Together.](#)

Phil Higuera

An associate professor of fire ecology at the University of Montana, Higuera answers media calls about both contemporary and ancient fires -- his specialty is fire history and paleoecology. His current research considers the 1910 [fires in the Great Burn Area](#), and the fires recorded in the same region thousands of years earlier. His media challenge is [fielding calls about this year's wildfires](#) and those that occurred thousands of years ago.

Michael Kudas

A veteran mountaineering and wildfire journalist, Michael Kudas is now associate director of the Center for Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado in Boulder. He has spent 30 years as a photojournalist, reporter, author and videographer. His most recent book, Megafire, was one of two [wildfire books reviewed at year's end](#) by the New York Times.

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Andrew Larson

Associate Professor Andrew Larson is a forest ecologist and forester whose research interests include disturbances and development of forest ecosystems, forest restoration, and management for climate change adaptation. His current fire-related research includes post-fire landscape management, effects of short-interval reburns on fuels and forest structure, modelling post-fire tree mortality, and wilderness fire management. He sees [a spike in press calls](#) during fire season.

Nate Rott

A reporter on NPR's National Desk, Nate Rott covers news of the American West, including wildland fires, for National Public Radio. A native of Missoula and graduate of the University of Montana School of Journalism, Rott worked as a wildland fire fighter for six years, serving as a fire PIO and ambulance driver during college. He covered the Yarnell Hill Fire fatalities in 2013 and [the California fires of 2017](#).

Nadia White

Associate Professor Nadia White is director of the graduate program in Environmental Science & Natural Resource Journalism at the University of Montana School of Journalism. She teaches science journalism and science communication, which are different. Prior to joining UM, White worked as a reporter at newspapers in Maine, Minnesota, Colorado and Wyoming. State and federal resource policies and news were central to her work as the Washington D.C. reporter, and, later, state editor, at the Casper (Wyo.) Star-Tribune.